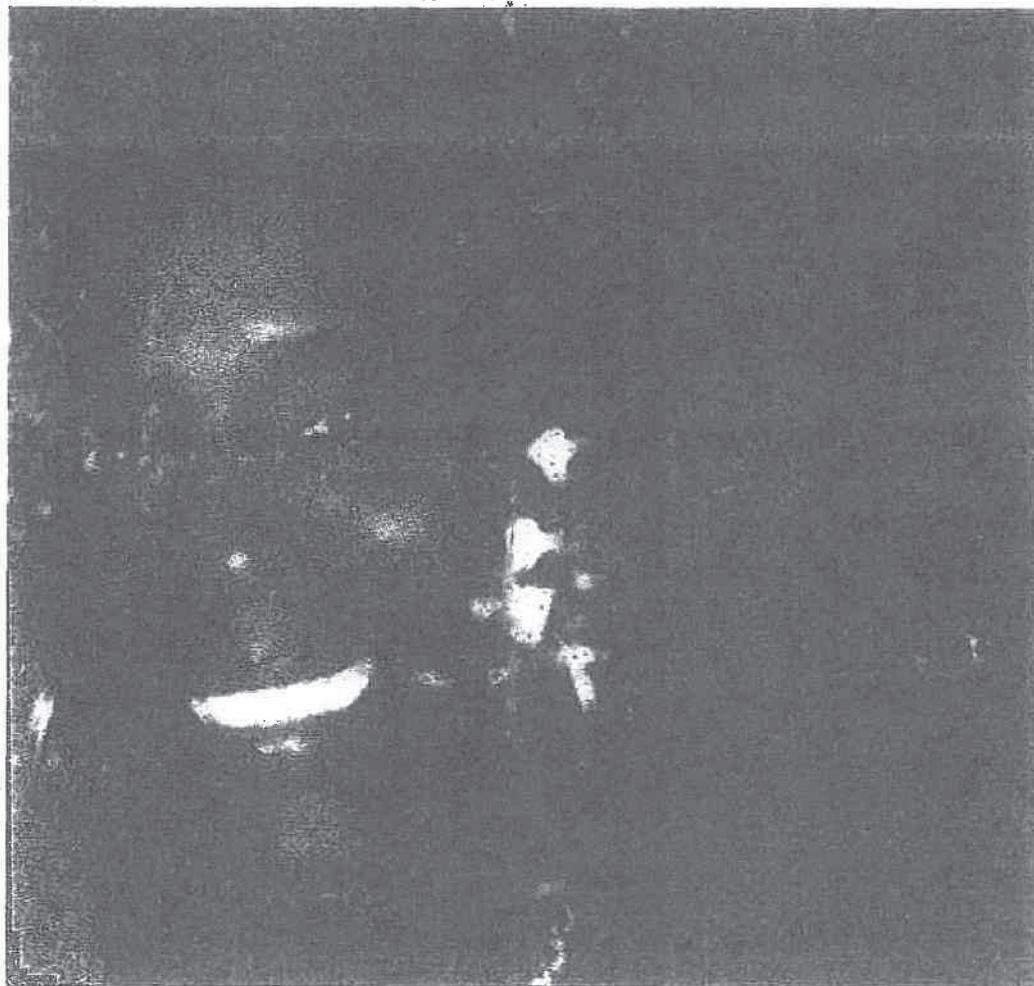


OPINION, EDITORIALS, LETTERS AND COLUMNS

Ohio Parole Board needs to be fully staffed and it needs to hold its meetings in public: editorial

Posted Feb 1



Former state Sen. Shirley Smith in a 2010 file photo. Smith, who served on the Ohio Parole Board for several years, charges that the board is too secretive,



unprofessional and unfair. (Plain Dealer file photo, 2010)

12

274
shares

By Editorial Board

Former state Sen. Shirley Smith, a Cleveland Democrat who resigned from the Ohio Parole Board late last year, has gone public with accusations that the board is secretive, unfair and inconsistent in its decisions. Smith, once chair of the legislature's Correctional Institution Inspection Committee, was appointed to the board in 2015 by Gary Mohr, then-director of the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC).

In a recent interview with cleveland.com's Jeremy Pelzer, Smith said the understaffed Parole Board often gives short shrift to inmates seeking parole. With many of their meetings not open to the public, she said members are often distracted by eating or other tasks. She also accused the board of being "harsher and stricter with people of color."

Shockingly, an ODRC spokeswoman offered no response to a number of Smith's concerns while responding to some of them for Pelzer's story. In July, August and September 2018, the Parole Board held 350 hearings to consider an inmate for parole; 15 percent of those inmates were granted parole.



Fully opening and live-streaming board meetings to the public, fully staffing the board and including more board members of varying backgrounds could go a long way to addressing problems that Smith cites.

Making all Parole Board meetings public may require a change in state law. Ohio's nonpartisan Legislative Service Commission says parole hearings "conducted at a correctional institution solely for the purpose of interviewing inmates to determine parole or pardon" are exempt from the state open-meetings law.

Then, there are too few Parole Board members. Ohio law authorizes the Parole Board to have up to 12 members, but it only has eight now - one-third fewer than its legally authorized strength.

Yet the pay is not paltry. ODRC says Parole Board members are paid \$95,000 to \$108,000 per year, with the chair's salary set at \$114,000. At that rate of pay, Ohioans have a right to expect full diligence from every board member.

Beyond the need for a full board roster is the matter of board members' backgrounds. As state law requires, one board member is appointed to represent crime victims. Of the current board's seven remaining members, three were at some point parole officers; one was a correctional officer, later a warden; and three worked for ODRC in other capacities. Clearly more diversity of background is needed. Smith said the board also needs more expertise in mental health and the behavioral sciences.

To maximize the panel's effectiveness in communicating with prospective parolees, the Parole Board also needs more African-American members. According to ODRC data, Ohio's prisons housed 48,954 inmates in January; 45.1 percent were African-American. Smith, who is African-American, told the editorial board that when she resigned, two of the remaining Parole Board members were African-American.



Because fairness is the key test for any parole agency, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, and new Gov. Mike DeWine to whom it answers, needs to address the concerns Smith raises.

About our editorials: Editorials express the view of the editorial board of cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer -- the senior leadership and editorial-writing staff. As is traditional, editorials are unsigned and intended to be seen as the voice of the news organization.

Have something to say about this topic?

* Send a letter to the editor, which will be considered for print publication.

* Email general questions about our editorial board or comments on this editorial to Elizabeth Sullivan, director of opinion, at esullivan@cleveland.com.

* Use the comments to share your thoughts. Then, stay informed when readers reply to your comments by using the "Follow" option at the top of the comments, & look for updates via the small blue bell in the lower right as you look at more stories on cleveland.com.

Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our User Agreement (updated 5/25/18) and Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement (updated 5/25/18).